

# Editorial

## On Generosity and Critique

Writing an editorial usually goes like this. After receiving a timely warning from our managing editor, I begin an – often – frantic search for something in the not-too-distant-past that upset or stimulated my feminist sensitivities enough to make me want to put pen to paper. In most cases, this takes the form of something aggravating in the media, a recent political event, a shift in feminist theorizing, or a women’s studies event.

My search began this time in the wake of a conference which left me feeling slightly cranky. It was a fairly routine conference. The presentations had been reasonably interesting, and yet the discussions were unpleasant, with a large proportion of the participants engaging in arrogant displays of theoretical muscle-flexing and antagonistic battles over which position was ideologically correct. I was reminded of an incident at a similar conference which had taken place several years ago, but had never quite vanished from my memory. It was during a presentation which someone had given about the merits of a well-known feminist theorist. At the end of her presentation, someone in the audience raised her hand and remarked that the speaker had given far too much credit to the theorist and not nearly enough to her own ideas. She proceeded to chastise the speaker for being too modest. It was her take on the theorist which was, in fact, the most interesting thing about her talk and had, in actual fact, raised the most exciting issues. While I don’t remember the details of what she said, I will never forget how the speaker reacted. She looked completely gobs-macked and, after a moment of silence, exclaimed: ‘Why how extraordinarily generous!’

It was the speaker’s surprise at the generosity of the person in the audience that impressed me at the time. And it is this very same surprise that has come back to me years later, because, indeed, generosity is not something that one often encounters in the academy these days. There are all kinds of reasons for this. Academic competitiveness precludes a readiness to give others credit for their brilliant writing, innovative insights, or charismatic teaching. Many academics are – not to put too fine a point on it – stingy and small-minded when it comes to praising their colleagues. If one finds generosity at all, it has usually been transformed into something

slightly inauthentic and off-putting. Giving compliments may be used as a strategy for impressing one's superiors and getting ahead, a form of careerism more vulgarly known as 'brown-nosing'.

Generosity is, of course, also shaped by class, gender and culture. The upper classes have traditionally been allowed to be generous (although, obviously, they do not always act generously). Having been born into wealth, they can afford to give some of it away (*noblesse oblige*). Women are expected to be more generous than men with their time and emotions, something which can account for some of the discrepancies in how much time academic men and women put into grading papers, supervising theses and counselling students. Some cultures are more conducive to generosity than others. For example, in the US, politeness conventions require displays of generosity, while the Dutch are notoriously suspicious of anything that smacks of a compliment (the C-word), considering it inauthentic, extreme, or simply embarrassing. *Doe maar gewoon en je doet gek genoeg* ('Just be ordinary and you'll be crazy enough') is the national motto.

However, it is not class, gender or national culture which prevent generosity in the academy. It is – to speak with Bourdieu – our *habitus* as scholars which most often stands in the way. In the academy, generosity seems to be regarded as antithetical to critique. Most scholars, whatever their theoretical or disciplinary persuasion, assume that it is their job to be critical. They are expected to police scientific standards, maintain theoretical distinctions and look for methodological and normative inconsistencies. Most of us are trained to ferret out problems, inaccuracies and weaknesses. This shapes the ways we read texts, how we teach our students, the manner in which we write articles and books and, of course, how we respond to the work of our colleagues.

There seems to be a contradiction between being critical and being generous. Being criticized, no matter how constructively, rarely feels like an act of generosity. Most of us feel defensive, even fearful, when we are criticized by our professors, our colleagues, or by other scholars. By the same token, if you engage in open and unstinting praise, you may be accused of not having cast a sufficiently critical eye. I have often heard despair in students' voices when they admit that they 'liked' a text. It is almost as though they had failed to be good academics (where good means critical).

It is this seeming contradiction between generosity and critique which I would like to address here. Encouraged by the example I mentioned at the outset of this editorial where critique and generosity went hand in hand, I would like to make a case for generous critique. As a case in point, I take the refereeing of articles for an academic journal, something which is obviously of some importance to the *European Journal of Women's Studies*.

Like most academic journals, we have a system of reviewing articles which is called 'anonymous, peer-reviewed'. This means that we send submitted manuscripts to be reviewed by 'peers' – by which we mean

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someone who is knowledgeable enough to be able to assess the merits of the manuscript. By making the review process anonymous (neither the editors who select the referees, nor the referees themselves know who the author is), it is assumed the referees will be impartial enough to give the manuscript a fair reading. Taken together, the goal is a review which will not only ensure that the standards of the journal are met, but will provide the author with constructive criticism which will help improve and strengthen the article, ultimately enabling it to be published in the journal.

Reviews are expected to be critical. But let us see whether their value is diminished when the reviewer is not only critical, but also generous. What does being generous in this case mean?

A generous reviewer will refrain from being unnecessarily harsh or using sarcastic language. She will not making sweeping generalizations about the value of the person's capacities as a scholar or the value of his or her work. She will try to place herself in the shoes of the person reading the critique and imagine how she herself would feel if the review was about her own work.

A generous reviewer will keep in mind that, however weak a manuscript may be, the author has gone to considerable time and trouble to write it. She will, therefore, begin her review by giving the author credit for what she or he has tried to do and note the things about the manuscript that are interesting/provocative/well-conceived. This is not simply because this will make the author feel better or soften the blows to come. It is also because the author needs to know which parts of the article should *not* be changed or deleted. (This idea comes from the Norwegian feminist literary critic Sissel Lie, who is also the author of several books on academic writing.)

A generous reviewer will be open-handed in her critique. She will not insist that the author share her own theoretical, methodological, or normative orientations. She will evaluate the manuscript on its own terms, rather than expecting it to look like something she would have written herself. (This is not to say that she has to agree with what the author has said and, in fact, we would be delighted if she decided to right a critical rejoinder to the article if she is so inclined.)

And, last but not least, a generous reviewer will spend a substantial amount of time writing the review. She will spend time reading the article (and sometimes even rereading it). She will think about what is missing and what needs to be reformulated and changed. And she will make specific and useful suggestions about how to revise the manuscript. A generous review will enable the manuscript to become the best it can possibly be.

In short, generous reviews are better reviews. This is because they highlight the importance of an author's contribution and help us understand what it is about an article that makes it interesting, useful, or timely. By trying to understand the author's intention, generous reviews can clarify the aim

or focus of the text, sometimes formulating the author's project more succinctly or creatively than the author was able to do herself. Generous reviews engage critically with the problems or weaknesses in the text at all levels (organizational, linguistic, theoretical, normative) as well as providing detailed and specific suggestions about how the text could be revised and improved. This kind of review is nothing less than a gift.

I would argue that generosity and critique are, therefore, not antithetical at all. On the contrary, good critique is, by definition, generous. In the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, we not only welcome generous reviews because we want to protect our authors from the ubiquitous nastiness endemic in the academy today. We welcome generous reviews because they make our journal better.

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The present issue begins with an exploration of the construction of feminist history, using the well-known British feminist periodical *Spare Rib* as a case in point. Krista Cowman deftly analyses the problems which emerge when feminists attempt to engage with their own past. She makes a convincing argument for a reflexive approach to feminist historiography which integrates alternative histories into broader historical narratives.

Adrienne Evans, Sarah Riley and Avi Shankar provocatively engage with the phenomenon of British sex shops as potential 'postfeminist heterotopias'. They show how sex shops involve a negotiation of notions of 'safe' and 'seedy'. Sex shops oriented towards women have opened up new spaces for (hetero)sexual subjectivities in the context of a sexualized culture.

In the next article, Deborah Withers returns to the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate, which has plagued feminist theory since its inception. Drawing upon the pop-singer Kate Bush as well as feminist notions of the goddess, she shows how a reconceptualization of the body as 'immanent flesh' can provide a way out of some of the earlier problems associated with essentialism.

The last three contributions are concerned with gender politics in Italy.

Donatella Campus takes up the gender gap in political participation in Italy, exploring how Italian women talk about politics with their friends, relatives and acquaintances. She shows how their everyday discourse can shed light on why women are reluctant to become involved in official politics.

The next two contributions belong to the 'Open Forum' and have been written in response to Veronica Pravadelli's piece 'Women and Gender Studies, Italian Style', which was published in an earlier issue of the journal. Chiara Saraceno criticizes Pravadelli's take on the state of women's studies in Italy, particularly concerning its (lack of) institutionalization. Pravadelli provides a rejoinder. We hope that these pieces will open up further discussion among our readers concerning the issue of institutionalization as

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well as how to interpret the successes and failures of feminism within the academy. And, of course, we would also like to see this discussion waged in a way which – to return to the subject of this editorial – is *both* intrepidly critical and *unstintingly* generous.

#### REFERENCE

Pravadelli, Veronica (2010) 'Women and Gender Studies, Italian Style', *European Journal of Women Studies* 17(1): 61–7.

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